

A photograph of the New York State Capitol building in Albany, New York. The building is a large, classical-style structure with a prominent portico supported by four tall columns. An American flag flies on a tall pole in front of the building. The word "Home" is written in a large, red, cursive script across the upper portion of the image. In the background, other city buildings are visible, including the Chrysler Building on the left.

Home

Bella Givens

HOME

BY BELLE GROOVES



For Saoirse, who never ceases to request another story.

I had tried three houses and they had all turned me away with a door to the face. I had stopped six cars and every one of them had barely listened before driving away. I mean, I knew I looked a little crazy with my hair in disarray and my shirt torn up and the deep cut on my arm, but I needed someone's help. I was exhausted and I . . . Well, I could barely stay on two feet. This nowhere town was small, with only one house left that I hadn't yet begged for help. And I think those six cars were the only ones in the whole town.

I stumbled up the stairs to the door and leaned against the porch rails for a moment before knocking. When the door opened and a girl about my age saw me leaning against the rails, she covered her mouth with her hands. I recognized the expression of horror from every other house I'd come across.

"Please, I need your help," I whispered.

She blinked a few times. "I . . . Who are you?"

A good question. "I'm not sure. That's why I need your help. I'm lost and I'm tired of doors slamming in my face, so if you're going to slam the door, at least give me a warning. You know what? I'll make it easier for both of us. I'll leave before you have the chance to close the door."

I pushed myself upright and walked down the steps slowly, careful not to hit my arm on the side rails and began to walk away from the house and the entire town. But something happened. That girl jumped down the stairs and told me to wait, so I stopped and turned around to see her standing on the bottom step.

"You . . . you really don't know who you are?" she asked. I shook my head. "Well, my dad is here. I'm sure he'll let you in for a little while. What do you say?"

I almost collapsed with relief. "Thank you."

She nodded and gestured toward the open door. I followed her inside and saw that the interior was just as poor as the exterior. The wood was fine in most places but rotting in others. The roof caved in slightly, enough to make me nervous. There was one couch covered in mildew and three windows that were all missing panes. And based on the three piles of worn-out blankets in the corner, I guessed there were no beds. I was beginning to wonder if I would be better off in the woods. Thankfully, they had a hearth with a fire going. That's where I sat the minute I noticed it.

I pushed a hand through my hair and accepted the glass of water that the girl offered, realizing for the first time how shaky I was and that my hand was covered in blood from the cut on my arm.

I glanced at the cut and noticed that it really was deep and still bleeding. It must have happened recently. I put the cup on the ground and looked over at the girl as she paced back and forth, muttering to herself.

"Hey, I need your help," I called to her.

She spun around and sighed, then sat beside me. "With what?"

"Well, what's your name?"

She stared at me again, she seemed to do that a lot, and finally shrugged. "June."

"Okay. Will you help me with this?" I rolled up my sleeve so she could better see the injury. "Before you ask, I have no idea how it happened or who did it. I... I need help."

She frowned at me. "You really *really* don't remember anything? Not even your name?"

I thought about it. My name was... Bob for all I knew. Andrew. Carlyle. Edward. I sighed and dropped my head in my hands. I didn't know my own name. "I don't know who I am or where I am or even my own age."

June smiled as she stood. "That's easy. Fourteen."

I looked up. "How do you know?"

"It's how old I am. You certainly don't seem any older than me." She pulled a loose thread from her dress and threaded a needle. "I'm afraid this is going to hurt."

"Wait. You aren't going to... I don't know. Clean it?"

"It is clean, Mr. Nameless. You probably shouldn't be by the fire though. Lay on the counter."

I stood up and did as she asked because what else was there to do? I had come here for help, after all, and she was offering it. June pulled a little stool beside the counter and leaned over the cut.

"You shouldn't look," she advised.

I turned away, but that hardly dulled the sharp pain when she stuck that cold needle through my arm. I gritted my teeth and closed my eyes but managed not to cry out or yank my arm away. I took deep breaths and waited until she pulled it through a last time before I really relaxed. She wrapped a cloth around my arm and tied it to keep it on. I sat up and pulled my sleeve back down while June cleaned up her things. She threw the extra thread into the fire and stuck the needle into her dress skirts. Then she turned to me.

"Look, whoever you are, you might not be able to stay here long. My father is a busy man, and my mother is always working, but we don't have enough... I mean, we can't afford..."

I nodded and scooted off the counter. "Thanks, June. You've done more for me than anyone else. It will be easier if I just leave."

"Wait. How did you say you got here?"

"I... I didn't. I woke up at the other end of the town. Everyone turned me away. Except you."

"I'm sure there's room for you to stay. Let me ask my father."

June smiled brightly at me and walked out the door. I watched her go down the steps and walk around to the back of the house. She stopped beside a tall man with silvery hair and matching gray eyes. He wore old jeans and a muddied red shirt, but the way he relaxed when he spoke to his daughter was certainly a good sign. Maybe he would let me stay. Except I should have run from that town until my legs wouldn't carry me. I should have run away into the woods and never looked back. Instead, I stayed.

As I watched the man and his daughter, something in his demeanor changed. He stiffened and pushed June behind him. When I saw why, I gasped. Two men, taller than June's father, were speaking to the man with crossed arms. They both wore suits, which seemed very out of place around here. One of them, the one who wasn't talking, kept looking inside. I couldn't help but think, maybe, just maybe, they were familiar. And that maybe they were here for me. Running suddenly felt like a very promising idea.

I watched them talk, then things changed again. The suits both pulled guns on the man and his daughter. They cocked the guns; I knew by watching their hands. I couldn't let them shoot the girl who had helped me. I couldn't let them shoot her father either. I took a deep breath and pushed open the front door, walked down the steps, and kept walking around to the back of the house. Both men seemed to recognize me instantly, and the younger of the two turned his gun on me.

"Listen, guys. Whatever you're here for, I'm sure we can talk it out," I suggested.

The younger man smiled at me, and had he not been pointing a gun at me, it wouldn't have seemed unkind. "Noah, don't be stupid. Come with us and we'll leave everyone here alone."

Noah. That was my name. It didn't seem to ring any bells. I walked closer to the men, stepping in front of June and her father. "What do you need me for?"

"The same thing we needed you for before you bolted."

"Well, I'll come with you if you let them go." I gestured to June and her dad.

"Once we're sure you won't run."

"All right."

I walked over to them cautiously and stood a couple feet away. Near enough for them to reach me if they wanted to. Which, as it turned out, they definitely did. The older man nodded, and the younger man stepped closer to me and cracked me across the jaw with his gun. I somehow, by some miracle, didn't cry out, but I did fall on my back and roll to my knees. When I stood, Mr. Young wrapped his hand around the collar of my shirt and lifted me off the ground.

"I want you to tell me right now that you aren't going to do anything as stupid as running again. Right now, Noah." I nodded. He threw me to the ground at his feet. "Say it!"

"I won't run," I muttered.

"Good." He dragged me back to my feet. "Go tell your friends they're free to go. I'll wait right here. Dave will be waiting in the car. Got it?"

I nodded and stumbled over to June and her father. "June, go inside with your father. And... Thank you."

Her father took my arm and looked down at me. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going with them, sir. They'll leave if I do."

"They'll kill you, too, from the looks of them."

I sighed and pulled my arm away. "I know. I don't know who they are, or even who I am, but I do know that it's safer for everyone here if I go with them."

"Everyone except you," June said.

"Everyone except me."

I turned away from them and walked back to the young man. He holstered his gun and grabbed my arm, pulling me toward the car. When I saw the small black car, I began to wonder who these men were and what on earth they could possibly need me for.

Before Mr. Young opened the door, I stopped and turned around to better see him. "Who are you?"

He just smiled. "Get in the car, Noah."

"Why?"

"I won't ask again."

"Fine. I'll get in if you tell me your name."

"Chase, like I told you before."

He pulled open the door and pushed me in, but he didn't close it. He slid in beside me and pulled a pair of handcuffs from inside his

jacket. I glanced at them.

"Are you... arresting me?"

Now Chase and Dave laughed. "Noah, please. We aren't arresting you. We're kidnapping you."

He grabbed both of my hands before I could even think to pull them away and snapped the cuffs tightly around my wrists. He didn't bother buckling my seatbelt or anything. As Dave started the engine, Chase shut the door and turned back to me.

"I can't have you see the way to where we're going," he said as he pulled out his gun. "I hope you understand."

He slammed the butt of his gun into the side of my head, and I slumped in the back of the small black car.

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I woke up in what appeared to be the basement of a warehouse or something. An old, abandoned warehouse. There were four metal pillars to help hold the ceiling up, one of which I was confined to. I was on my knees with my arms wrapped around the pillar and my wrists cuffed so that I couldn't escape. My head throbbed where Chase had hit me with his gun, and I vaguely knew that I was bleeding. What worried me most was that I didn't see either Chase or his accomplice, Dave. There was a flight of stairs to my right, probably why they had chosen this pillar.

In the back of my mind, I couldn't help but think all of this was horribly familiar. Only, I couldn't grasp the memories. I was alone in a warehouse. I was handcuffed to a metal pillar. I had no memories of who I really was or what was happening. I didn't see how any of this could get worse.

Then I heard Chase come down the stairs. I knew it was Chase because I recognized his light footing. He always walked like he was afraid someone would overhear his footsteps. I don't know why I knew how the man walked; I just did.

He knelt beside me and yanked my sleeve up to uncover the bandaged cut. It had already bled through the thin cloth. "Got some help, did you?"

I didn't answer. I watched him rip the cloth off my arm. He pulled a knife from his pocket and stuck it under each of the stitches, pulling them out one at a time. I still didn't make any sound of pain, but I had to turn away and squeeze my eyes shut. When Chase was finished, he walked around the pillar so he could see me.

"There. Now. All you need to do is talk to your father for me so

he can hear your voice. You can even tell him where you are. Then we'll leave you alone. It's that easy."

That's all they wanted? Why had I refused before? Who was my father? "I...don't want to talk to my father."

"Look, I know about the petty little argument you had with him, but I don't care."

I turned away from him. If they wanted me to tell my father where I was, that could only mean they wanted him to come here. Whoever my father was, he must be an important man. I guessed they wanted to lure him here and kill him, and I couldn't let that happen.

Chase pressed his blade against my back. "I'll give you another chance, Noah. Dave is bringing the phone down right now. You talk to your dad and that's it. All right?"

I shook my head. We stayed like that, Chase and I, until Dave came down those steps with a phone in his hand. Chase pressed the knife deeper into my back, and I caught my breath. I watched Dave type the digits and then he set the phone on the ground beside me. I didn't need to be told what I was meant to do again, but I didn't do it. I kept my mouth shut and my eyes closed. Then I heard a man's voice on the phone. My father's voice, though I didn't recognize it.

"Hello? Who is this?" the voice asked.

I stayed silent.

"Hello?"

I leaned down toward the phone as though to speak, but I didn't say a word. I moved my leg out from under me and crushed the device under my shoe. Dave drew his gun and Chase angrily pulled the knife down my back, cutting me again. And still, I only gasped. He dropped the knife and nodded to Dave.

I glanced at the gun. "Wait, Chase. Don't shoot me. Please. How can I talk to my father if I'm dead?"

He paused on the steps. "He won't shoot you where you'll die. Only so you'll think before you do something else so stupid."

He did shoot me. In the same leg I had moved from underneath me, below the knee. I gritted my teeth and rested my head against the metal pole while Dave followed Chase up the stairs. I took a few deep breaths as I slowly, slowly, slowly moved my leg underneath me again. I didn't want to see the blood or the hole in my pants. I didn't care if it hurt worse this way, it was a more comfortable position and it kept me from seeing what I had no desire to see.

The pain never went away while I was left down there. If

anything, it intensified. I began to sweat only minutes after they left me alone. I stayed on my knees with my forehead on the cold metal, trying to breathe evenly and not hyperventilate. I was doing a fairly decent job. One upside to the pain was that I could no longer feel the cut in my back or arm. The downside was that being shot was a heck of a lot more painful than being cut.

I have no idea how long they left me alone like that, as I was in the dark and underground. I might have passed out once or twice, though I can't be sure. I do know that when Chase came down those stairs again, he found me exactly how I'd been for at least several hours now. I turned away when he crouched beside me.

"Noah, don't worry. I can see we're never going to make this work by hurting you. I'm going to bring someone down here who you care about."

I shouldn't have spoken to him, but I wanted to know who he was talking about. I certainly recalled nothing of my family. "Who?"

Dave came down the stairs behind a boy who looked older than I was, maybe sixteen. His eyes were the same blue as mine, his hair the same brown. He was obviously of some relation to me, and I suspected I knew exactly how we were related, even if I couldn't recall my own brother's name.

Dave pushed him down the steps and he fell to his knees beside Chase, who made sure the ropes around his hands were secure. Then Chase looked at me. "When I come back with a phone in my hand, I expect you to cooperate, or it's him I'll shoot." He pulled Dave with him, and they left us alone.

The older boy, my brother, sat up and seemed to only just now realize he wasn't alone. He stared at me in silence, like he'd never seen me before. I think I did the same thing, but at least I had a reason for it. He hadn't lost his memory... As far as I knew.

"Noah?" he whispered.

I rested my head against the pillar. "Yep."

A huge smile grew on his lips. "Mom and Dad were really worried about you. When you disappeared, they thought you'd run away because of the argument. But here you are, alive and healthy."

I guess his eyes hadn't really adjusted to the darkness or he would've easily seen the blood down my back and arm and beneath me. My arm had mostly stopped, and my back was slowing down, but my leg wasn't. Or if it was, it certainly didn't feel any better. He probably would've seen the tension in my eyes as well.

But he didn't see any of it. I decided, after a moment of

studying him again, that I would be honest with him. So, I asked first if he was actually my brother.

His smile fell instantly. "I'm Milo, Noah, your brother. Yes. Why... Why would you even ask that?"

I looked at him. "I... I can't remember anything. I don't know who our father is or who our mother is or who you are or who I am. I only know my name because Chase said it. I'm at a loss, Milo."

"You don't know who I am?"

"I know you're my brother, that was easy enough to figure out. I know your name is Milo because you told me. But... that's all. Please, tell me what's going on."

Milo scooted away from me. "Well, you... You argued with Dad about something, I'm not sure what. I wasn't in the room. You stormed out. Then you didn't come back for lunch. That was nothing new though. What worried us was when you didn't come for dinner. We went looking for you. In every room, outside, everywhere. Noah, it was like you had vanished. You were... gone. We never thought... I didn't know you'd been kidnapped."

I took a deep breath and let my head fall against the pole. "It doesn't sound like I was fond of Father."

Milo chuckled. "Father. You must still be in there somewhere." He grew serious. "You didn't hate him; you just didn't agree with everything he did."

I closed my eyes. "How long have I been away?"

"You left two weeks ago, Noah."

I shook my head. "Okay, Milo. What do these people want from me? They want me to call Father and tell him where I am. It's obviously so he'll come here, but why? Who is our father?"

"You don't remember who Dad is?"

"No. Should I? Who is he?"

"Noah, he's the president of America."

I sat up, and immediately regretted such a sudden movement. I gasped at the sharp pain in my back and new pressure on my leg. Milo stayed where he was, but he looked worried. I felt the blood drain from my face. I steadied my breathing and relaxed a little.

"Are you...okay, Noah?"

I took a few more breaths and found my voice. "I'm fine," I breathed. "Our father is the president?"

"You don't look fine..."

Milo was yanked to his feet by Dave. I hadn't heard them come down with all my talking and questions. I noticed the knife against

my brother's neck. Chase crouched beside me and gripped my shoulder painfully. He held the phone in front of my face.

"Talk or he dies."

He dialed the number. I waited for someone to answer. It took longer for my father to answer this time. He sounded worried and angry. I guess that was my fault.

"Yes?"

Chase put the phone down beside me. I cleared my throat. "Father?"

For a long time, he didn't say anything. Then he did. "Noah? Noah, are you there?"

"Yes. I'm here. Father, listen. I was taken—"

Chase put his hand over my mouth and shook his head. He leaned close to me and whispered in my ear. "Taken to a rundown building. 1439. That's all you know. Don't say anything else."

I nodded, and he moved his hand away. I exhaled. "Taken to a rundown building. 1439."

He paused for a minute. "That's it?"

"Yeah, that's... that's all."

"Noah, are you hurt?"

I didn't know how to answer that. I looked at Chase and he shook his head. I sighed. "No. I'm all right."

"Good. Is... is Milo there with you?"

Chase nodded this time. "Milo is here, yeah. He's fine." Chase signaled for me to end the call with his hand. "Bye, Father."

"Wait, No—"

Chase did the honor of smashing the phone underfoot this time. Dave pushed Milo against the wall and glanced threateningly at me. Chase released my shoulder, but he held his gun alarmingly close to me. "If he doesn't come, it's on you."

"How is that my fault?" I asked.

He hit me across the jaw with his gun again and my head snapped to the left. I stayed turned away from him while he spoke.

"Everything that goes wrong is your fault."

He stood to leave but thought better of it and knelt to tighten my cuffs. He scowled at me as he followed Dave upstairs. I turned away from them both and released a breath.

Milo shuffled closer to me and put one of his hands on my shoulder. "Are you all right?" he asked again.

I shrugged. "I'm fine, Milo. I need a minute to rest."

He nodded and scooted back to the wall. I sighed heavily and

rested my head against the pillars once more and closed my eyes. I steadied my breathing and relaxed. And I dreamt.

Father was there in the room, the Oval Office, sitting at the desk. I was standing in front of him. He looked exhausted and stressed, as I recall. I think he always looked like that when I spoke to him.

"Noah, can this wait?" he asked.

"No, Father. I'm not going," I said.

"It's a vacation, Noah. To have fun."

"Then why isn't Milo coming? Or Mother? Or you, Father? Why don't we all go?" I had waited for his response, but it never came. "It isn't a vacation. You're sending me away."

He looked at me. Finally. "No, I'm not sending you away. I'm giving you time away from all of this."

"I don't want time away from all of this! I want more time with you!" My voice cracked. "I want more time with you and Mother. We're never together, Father, unless it's for the camera. Unless it'll make you look good on television." I stepped away from his desk.

"Well, I'm sick of it and I'm through with it."

He stood up. "What does that even mean?"

"It means I'm done with this life."

He grabbed my arm. "Wait, Noah, you can stay. We'll try to be together more often."

I pulled my arm away and turned to him. "That's it, then? You'll try? You've tried a dozen times and it's always the same. We eat dinner or play golf, or we do something else that's supposed to be fun until you're called away to work. Until you're too busy for us. I've had enough, Father. I've had enough of politics and the White House and... and I've had enough of you."

My eyes shot open when I heard Chase walk down the stairs. I glanced back at Milo, he was sleeping and seemed like he might sleep forever. Dave didn't follow Chase down, I noticed. The man crouched beside me, and I recognized fear in his eyes.

"Listen closely, Noah. I'm going to unlock your cuffs and I'm going to escort you upstairs. Then you're going to walk outside and give yourself to the Secret Service in exchange for your father. If you so much as think about running or escaping, I'll hurt you. Do you understand?"

"Can I say something?" I asked.

He scowled. "What?"

"Are you really stupid enough to believe they would exchange

the president for me? I'm fourteen, Chase, hardly worth risking the man's life. My father probably isn't even out there."

He backhanded me. "Keep your mouth shut." He moved around to the other side of the pole to unlock the handcuffs.

Another thought occurred to me then. "They also expect to see me uninjured. I don't know if you noticed or not, but I'm not unharmed. If you want someone to pass as uninjured, use my brother for the exchange. If they see me like this, they aren't going to leave so easily. They'll think you did the same to Milo."

Chase paused from inserting the keys into the little hole. "And why, if he isn't here, should I give up either one of you?"

"They won't leave without one of us and I told them I was unhurt. I told you, if they see me, they'll think Milo is hurt too."

He cursed. "Fine." He went over to my brother and cut the ropes from his wrists, waking him in the process. He took Milo's elbow and hauled him to his feet. "Let's go."

Milo turned back and narrowed his eyes at me. I smiled tiredly and watched them go, my whole body beginning to ache and feel cold. My situation was finally beginning to dawn on me, but I was still confused. What did Chase hope to accomplish by capturing the president? Blaming it on Russia and starting a war? Did he hope to kill him? Demand millions? I clicked my tongue. Money. That was it. They were after money. But why the president? He could've demanded money for me, and I was sure my father would pay it.

I shook my head and turned away from the stairs. I didn't care what they were going to do. I still didn't even really know what was happening or how I'd escaped the first time. I still didn't know what my father looked like, there was only a blur in the general shape of a middle-aged man. I didn't even know his name or my mother's. I blew out a breath and let myself relax.

It was a long time before Chase and a man came down. I'd been sleeping on and off for hours now, dreaming about the blur of my father. Sometimes Chase was there with his gun. Sometimes Milo was sleeping in the corner. But it was always the same argument. Him trying to send me away. I wondered if he had really meant it as a vacation for me, if I had been too upset with him to realize it then. Then I also wondered what else he'd done for us to be so disagreeable. I didn't understand it.

It was during that train of thought when the man tumbled into me. I didn't make a sound, but he had landed heavily on my back, and I felt the injury open again as he rolled off me. I didn't bother looking

back at him, or at Chase, I stayed where I was and kept quiet. Chase looked down at the man and kicked him before going away up the steps. I tried to breathe evenly and ignore the pain in my back, but it was hard when I felt like I'd been ripped open. The man must have heard me because he stood up and looked over at me. I didn't look at him, but I saw his blue gaze and noticed that he wore a suit. His black hair was sweaty and looked... well, a lot how I imagined my hair must have looked by then. I also noticed that his hands were cuffed in front of him.

He studied me and finally crouched so we were level. "Noah, is that you?"

Of course he knew me. I met his gaze. "Yeah."

He looked me over again. "I thought you weren't hurt?"

"Do I look hurt?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Uh, yeah, you do."

I must've looked worse than I thought. "I'll be okay. I just need you to answer a question."

"What's that?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm Agent Owen, Noah. Don't you recognize me?"

I nodded. "Right. Owen."

"Have you been here all this time?"

Except those few hours in the town. "Yep."

"What did they do?"

I frowned. "You looked at me, didn't you?"

"Nothing I can't see?"

I briefly closed my eyes. "Yes, actually. They shot me."

Owen looked bored. "Really?"

"Wha— Yes, really. In the leg."

"You're serious?"

"I don't think I've ever been more serious."

Owen sighed. "Fine. Let me see."

I sighed. "I can't move my legs or feel them. I've been sitting like this for hours, quite possibly a day or two. You'll have to take my word for it."

"You aren't exactly a boy of your word, Noah," Owen said.

I thought about that. I argued with my father. I wasn't often there for lunch. I apparently broke promises left and right. I really sounded like a terrible person. I hung my head.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"Uh... What for?"

"I don't know. Everything. Milo being here. You being here. Putting my father in danger. This is all my fault, Owen."

I could feel Owen's eyes on me. "Did you hit your head?"

"No. Well, they hit my head."

He sighed. "Noah, this must be hard for you, but everything will be fine."

I looked up at him. "Do I look fine to you, Owen? Does anything about this situation look fine to you?" He rolled his eyes. "Nothing is fine. I've been a hostage for two weeks. I'm hungry and dehydrated. I'm cold. I am exhausted, Owen. I'm exhausted from all of this. The only reason I'm even in this situation is because of my father. If he's the president, why can't he send someone here to get me? I can't..." I stopped and turned away. I sounded exactly how I had when I argued with Father. "I don't mean that. I know he's busy. I know he cares about me. I heard it in his voice on the phone. He's worried."

Owen raised a brow and shook his head. "You sound worried."

"I am worried, Owen," I muttered.

"About getting out of here?"

"What? No, about Father."

"Oh."

I heard Chase again. He was yelling at someone who I guessed was Dave. Then I heard a gunshot and pacing footsteps. Chase pounded down the stairs with the gun in his hand and got remarkably close to me.

"This is your fault, Noah. If we had sent you out like I said, then Dave wouldn't have doubted me. He had to die."

I scooted away from him as far as I could. "I don't know what you're talking about, Chase. I helped you."

He hit his gun against the metal pillar, and I flinched. He smiled. "Good." He reached into his pocket and pulled out the keys to the handcuffs. I watched him turn the key, heard the click. The restraints fell from my hands. I was free.

Chase dropped his gun and jumped on top of me, wrapping his hands around my throat. I gripped his wrists with my own hands, but I was weak. I couldn't breathe. Black spots appeared in my vision. I closed my eyes and was barely aware of the weight that left me. I heard Chase groan and I gasped, sucking gulps of air. I sat up and pushed a hand through my hair.

Owen held his hand out to me. I guess he'd gotten the keys and freed himself. "You okay?"

I nodded and let him pull me to my feet. "Fine."

He shrugged and walked toward the stairs. I took one step and fell to my hands and knees. My leg and back hurt so much. My adrenaline was gone, any shock had worn off. I couldn't move from that position. But I still didn't cry out, which was why it took Owen several minutes to notice my absence. He had to walk back down the stairs to see me on the floor.

My back was still bleeding a little from when he'd fallen on me, but I was sure it would've hurt plenty anyway. My arm wasn't still bleeding, but there was dried blood all down it and on my hand. My leg had stopped bleeding too, but it hurt so much I wasn't certain I'd walk again. Besides that, I was horribly thin and weak. I was exhausted. My wrists were raw and blistered. I was quite sure there was a bruise where Chase's gun had hit me. When Owen came back, the best I could do was push myself to a sitting position and hold my head in my hands.

He looked down at my leg and sighed. "You'll be fine. We have to get out of here, Noah. Come on."

"I can't. You have to leave me," I whispered.

"Don't be an idiot. I'm not leaving you. Your father would fire me and then he'd kill me." He paused to think about something. "And then he would fire me again."

I let Owen wrap my good arm around his neck and haul me up. I limped up the stairs with his help and we didn't stop to look around. He took me through the doors, so we were outside. I would've completely collapsed then if he hadn't been holding me up. As it was, he had to sit me down against the building's exterior. The rough wood was painful to my back, but I only winced. Owen knelt beside me and actually managed to look concerned.

"Wait right here."

I smiled. "You say that like I could actually go anywhere."

I saw him shake his head as he went back inside. I leaned my head back on the wall and closed my eyes. My hands lay lazily clasped in my lap, my legs straight out. I imagined any cars passing by would think I was dead. I was close to sleep when Owen came back and shook my shoulder.

He dropped a shirt several sizes too large for me on my lap. I noticed he had three guns with him, all shoved into his waist band. One was Chase's, one would have been Dave's. The other was his that they had confiscated, I supposed. "Put that on and we'll get going."

I leaned forward and began to remove my shirt, but it pulled on the cut in my arm where blood and sweat had bonded it to my skin.

My other sleeve came off easily, so when I finally asked Owen to help me, my shirt was only on half of my body. He crouched down and did exactly what I had been trying to avoid doing. He pulled on the sleeve until it unstuck, and he made me bleed again. He tore up my old shirt and tied a strip of it around my arm, then he lifted the new shirt.

"You need help to put this on too?" he asked.

"Are you really offering?"

Owen rolled his eyes and cursed before he finally helped me pull the sweatshirt over my head. I was feeling much better than I recently had until Owen started rolling up the leg of my pants. I pushed his hands away.

"Wait, Owen. That's going to hurt when it goes on top of the injury," I protested.

"Yes, but you seem to have a high pain tolerance. You'll be fine." He started rolling again.

"What makes you think that?"

"Well, you aren't crying like a kid should. You aren't screaming at the top of your lungs. You've yet to pass out. I think you're doing quite well, actually."

Too bad he said that before pushing the rolled-up cuff of my pants up past the bullet wound. I mean, I didn't scream. I gasped and vomited, but nothing came up. I dimly wondered when I had last eaten. I think Owen wondered that as well because when he finished tying the ruined shirt around my leg, he waited until I was done gagging and then pulled me upright.

"Noah, lift up your shirt," he said. I did, and I saw why he had asked. I could see my ribs pushing against the skin. I was fairly certain I wasn't supposed to be that skinny. "When was the last time you ate anything?"

I dropped my shirt and clasped my hands again. I couldn't remember ever eating because of my memory loss and I hadn't eaten anything since they kidnapped me the second time. "Owen, there's something I need to tell you," I whispered.

He sat down and crossed his legs. "All right."

I looked at him. "I... I lost my memory."

He narrowed his eyes. "Then how do you know who your father is?"

"My brother told me when we were here together. But I only know he's the president. I don't know his name or my mother's name or anything. I only know my name because Chase called me by it."

He didn't look as if he believed me. "Tell me when this

happened.”

I was about to tell him, but the window above me shattered and I had to roll away to avoid Chase landing on top of me. Owen, thankfully, jumped on top of him. They tumbled over one another, punching and kicking, and then Chase was on top, and he jumped to his feet and viciously kicked Owen in the head. With Owen unconscious, he came to pay me a visit. He kicked me in the side twice and punched me in the gut, effectively chasing away my breath. He sat on my legs and easily grabbed my hands. He wrapped a short rope around my wrists, the coarse string more painful to my raw wrists than cuffs ever could’ve been. He tied it tight and yanked me up with him. He held me up and whispered in my ear.

“This isn’t about your father anymore, Noah.”

“Let me guess. It’s about me?” I gasped.

“Very good.”

He kneed me in the side, and I crumpled to the ground where he kicked me again and again. I think he wanted me to beg him to stop or to scream or cry. I didn’t. I tried to get away, until I couldn’t move. When I stopped moving, he crouched down again.

“Well?” he sneered.

I sucked in a rattling breath and winced. “Well, what?” I wheezed.

“Aren’t you tired—”

Chase slumped forward beside me, face down. Owen stood over both of us, looking as though this type of thing happened every day. He looked down at me for a minute and I let my hands drift to my side. Then he crouched beside me and shook his head.

“You’re too young for this...” He helped me sit up and kept his hand on my back while he pulled away the rope. “Noah, you need to stand up and come with me. I know a place not far from here where we can call your father. Do you think you can walk with me?”

I tried to calm my breathing and breathe deeply, but I couldn’t. Not this time. My breaths were ragged, and the air was painful inside of me. I pushed the hair from my eyes and did manage to sigh.

“Owen, I can’t. I can’t move,” I breathed.

“Yes, you can. Come on.”

He took my elbow and lifted me up, but I stumbled. I couldn’t stand. He crouched down in front of me instead and pulled my arms over his shoulders, then he stood as I wrapped my legs around his waist. He reached back and held me up on his back and started walking down the road.

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I counted three whole cars as we walked down the road, two of them were trucks and one was a minivan. I started counting stop signs after a while of seeing no cars; there were five. Well, I counted five before I got bored with them and counted twenty-two birds. By that time, I'm fairly sure I was delirious.

I couldn't tell if Owen was tired of carrying me or not, but based on his grunts to my questions, he definitely was. He kept walking and walking, sure beyond a doubt that whatever he was hoping to see would be somewhere ahead of us.

As the sun began to set, I began to slide from Owen's back. He hoisted me up often enough, but my arms were tired of holding on to his shoulders and trying not to choke him. I was also exhausted and holding myself up was growing tiresome. My side ached, my back ached from being bent so long, and my... Actually, everything ached. My whole body hurt, and I needed water and food.

I lifted my head from Owen's back. "I think we should stop."

He shook his head. "Nope."

"Why not?"

"It's just up ahead."

I squinted my eyes and didn't see anything. "Nothing is up ahead, which definitely means nothing is *just* up ahead. So, stop saying that."

He grunted in response. I sighed and then I let go of his shoulders and let myself fall into the dirt on the side of the road. I winced and grabbed my side as I forced myself to sit up. I rose to my knees and stood on my own two feet. Owen folded his arms over his chest while he stared at me disapprovingly. I scowled at him and slowly, very slowly, limped to where he stood on the road.

He looked down at me. "I thought you couldn't move, much less walk."

I took as deep a breath as I could manage. "I couldn't walk when I said that, and I didn't fall so we could keep going. I need sleep."

"We all do."

"Look, Owen, whatever I did to make you hate me, I'm sorry. All right? I *apologize*."

"You didn't do anything to me. You ran away from your father and now he's in danger *because* of you. If anyone has the right to hate you, it's him and the rest of your family."

There was absolutely nothing I could say to that, and if there

was, it wouldn't have made a difference. He was right. I remembered part of the argument, I recalled the way Milo had talked about it and me, and I saw the way Owen always looked at me. They all hated me anyway, so what did it matter if I ever got my memory back? If I ever made it home again, nobody would care. I was a terrible person, and if getting my memory back would bring all of that back, I didn't want any part of it.

I turned away from Owen and sat on the side of the road with my head in my hands. My father probably would've been a happier man if he had decided to leave me. They all would've been happier without me. I hated myself after hearing everything. This whole time, I'd been wondering about going back home to my family, *my family*, and now it couldn't be clearer that they didn't need me. In fact, I had half a mind to walk away from Owen. If I'd been able to get away, I might have tried, but I was exhausted and weak and injured. My everything hurt, and now this. Now I... I don't know. I felt alone, I guess.

I wanted to be with my family because I wanted someone to wrap me in their arms and cry for my return. I wanted someone to notice that I needed them. I needed a father at that moment because I knew he would understand. I needed a mother because she would hold me in her arms. I needed a brother because he would laugh and make jokes and make me smile. I wanted all of this to be over. To go home. And none of it was possible. It wasn't possible because my father and I disliked one another. I didn't know anything about Mother, but I guess we never saw each other. And Milo, he seemed to like me at least some, but I got the feeling it was a new and fragile relationship between us. All of this, because of me, made it impossible for me to feel like I had a home. Without my memory, I didn't recall much of our life together, but I knew I wouldn't exactly be welcomed in with open arms. And that thought, that one thought, broke my heart.

I rubbed my eyes so I wouldn't cry, but it happened regardless. I hunched over with one arm around my side and cried. Not loudly, but I felt the warm tears on my hand and my cheeks. The heaving breaths hurt me, and I did pull myself together after a minute, if only to ease the pain. I wiped away the tears and exhaled a couple of deep breaths. Then I pushed a hand through my hair and sighed.

Owen was quiet for a long time, muttering to himself on the side of the road and pacing back and forth. He kept glancing over at me and shaking his head. Eventually, he stood beside me and seemed

to have finally gathered himself.

"Noah," he said quietly.

To which I winced before whispering, "That is my name."

"I need you to be serious, Noah, please."

I closed my eyes to rest them. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. Your father, he doesn't hate you. He's actually very worried for your safety."

I nodded absently. "Yes, I... I know that." I looked at him. "I woke up a few days ago in this small town. A girl, June, helped me. I, uh, I didn't know my name or anything about what had happened. I was a stranger, and she... let me in anyway. Then these two guys, Chase and Dave, came to her house. Her father was there; he spoke to them. I went outside and I told them I would go with them if they left June and her father alone. And they did. I got in the car, and the next thing I knew, I was in that warehouse building. When Chase talked about my father, I thought if I could only escape, then I could find him and he..." my voice broke. I shook my head. "He would be waiting for me to come home, standing with the door open wide. And now, even not really knowing him, I know that's... never..." I closed my eyes again. "It's impossible," I breathed.

Owen put his hand on my shoulder. "Your father is the president of the United States. He is doing everything he can, Noah, *everything*, to make sure you come home. Without knowing what the danger is, however, there is only so much he can do. But I promise you, when we call him, he'll personally come to get you."

"I don't even know their names, Owen."

"Benedict and Ina Costello."

Benedict and Ina, my father and mother, two people I knew nothing about. "Father and Mother?"

Owen nodded. "You still don't remember?"

I took a shaky breath. "I do not."

"Well, they—"

"Don't," I said. "Just, please, don't. I don't need a description of them. What I need is sleep."

He moved his hand from my shoulder and got up to stand by the road. I lay down on my back and closed my eyes, trying to relax despite the pain the dirty ground caused me. I gave up after a time and stared at the stars, letting my thoughts wander. I saw Owen on the road a few times, standing still and staring at nothing. Eventually, I couldn't keep my eyes open, and I fell asleep, my back and side aching.

I woke to someone slapping me in the face. My first thought was a jumbled mess of food and my father. My second thought was more rational: why would Owen slap me? By the time I got to thought five, I realized several things. My mouth was taped closed, and my wrists and ankles were bound with rope. My hands were tied behind me, my legs straight out. I was leaning against a tree. I blinked to bring my vision into focus and looked around for Owen, but he was nowhere. I saw no sign that he had ever been with me. I realized I was still on the roadside, though where no one would notice me against the back of the tree. After all of this, I finally looked up to see who it was that had slapped me into consciousness, and I almost screamed.

Chase stood over me, a knife in his hand, a scowl on his face. I wondered briefly why Owen hadn't shot him outside the warehouse. He knelt beside me and held the blade against my neck.

"I'm going to remove that tape so you can answer my questions. If you even *try* to call for help, I'll kill you." I nodded and he ripped the tape from my lips. It stung, but it was less pain than I'd previously experienced. "Now. Where's your friend?"

"I don't know. He was here with me last night," I said.

"I don't believe you, Noah. I think you know exactly where he is. Now tell me."

I felt the knife prick my skin. "I don't know. I swear, Chase. If he's still here, then he did a splendid job of hiding."

He narrowed his eyes and I gasped. I felt him drive his knife into my side, deep, and when he pulled it out, I would have screamed if he hadn't placed his hand over my mouth. I glanced down and saw a blossoming flower of red spread across my shirt. He dropped his hand from my mouth and watched me topple from the tree's support and flat onto my back. I think I stopped breathing for a minute before releasing my breath and gasping again. The pain was crushing.

He crouched beside me and shook his head. "The truth, Noah. The truth."

I drew in a cold and painful breath. "I... told you. I don't..." I gathered another breath, but then I saw something that caught my attention. "He's behind you."

Chase spun around and dropped his knife beside me. If I hadn't felt like I was about to die, then maybe I would have grabbed it and freed myself. But I was already hurt and being stabbed hadn't helped me feel any better. So I stayed where I was, trying to keep breathing, and watched Owen slam his gun into Chase's head. He collapsed in

the dirt with a moan. Owen holstered his gun and cut the ropes from my wrists and ankles, then he pressed on the wound. I grabbed his hands and tried to push them away, but in my state, I might as well have been pushing a brick wall for all the good it did.

"Stop. I have to stop the bleeding. Luckily for you, he missed any vital organs or blood vessels or anything else important. You'll probably live, if we can get somewhere where they can help you."

I dropped my hands to the ground. "Probably?" I gasped.

"I'm not going to let you die, Noah."

"That's good... because I don't want to die without... without..." I shut my eyes and really tried to breathe evenly, but I couldn't. My breath was stuck in my throat.

Owen lifted my shirt to look at the injury. "Breathe, Noah. Deep breaths. In and out. Just breathe."

I did as he said. I sucked in the air and breathed it out. In and then out. When I opened my eyes, I saw him leaning over Chase. I didn't know what he was doing, until he crouched beside me again with Chase's shirt. Of course. He set it on the ground and put one hand against my back and the other he used to hold my arm. I pulled in a breath and tried to help him, but he still did almost all the work in pulling me to my feet. It was a good thing he was holding onto me because I would've fallen over if he hadn't been.

Owen kept his hand on my back as he leaned over to grab the shirt. It was thin and probably would work fine for his intentions. I lifted my shirt when I was steady and watched him wrap it around me and tie the sleeves together on my other side so it would stay up. He tied it surprisingly tight considering what it was. I pulled my own stained shirt over the injury and felt both of Owen's hands rest on my shoulders. I met his dark blue gaze.

"We're close to a small town. If you get on my back, we can make it there before nightfall," he said.

I glanced behind him and noticed that he had used the ropes to tie Chase up. Then I turned back to him. "I was going to say something earlier," I whispered.

Owen nodded slowly. "Yes."

"I was going to say that I didn't want to die without apologizing to Father."

"Noah, are you going to get on my back?"

I blinked at him. "Why?"

He sighed and pushed me down gently, so I was sitting on the ground. "The town. We're close."

"Oh, right. Yeah," I breathed. "I'll get on."

Owen turned around, and I used his back to push myself to my feet, but I fell as I was about to wrap my arms around his shoulders. I winced and a hand automatically went to my side. I gritted my teeth and climbed on his back, my legs around his waist. He stood and reached back to hold me up. I wasn't sure I was even holding myself up at all, but he didn't say anything so I stayed the way I was.

"You're good?" he asked.

"Yep," I said.

"You sure?"

"Owen, I'm all right."

He nodded and walked up onto the road, then he started down it. He walked the same way we'd been going before, straight ahead and down toward some town. I still wasn't sure this place existed, but I was too exhausted to argue with the agent.

He walked for a long time before finally saying he had to pause for a break. He stopped on the roadside and knelt so I could climb off his back. I didn't really climb; it was more accurate to say I collapsed to the ground from his back. I landed in a sitting position and pushed the hair from my eyes, breathing heavily. Owen turned around and sat beside me.

"Relax, Noah," he said.

I couldn't relax. I leaned over with my arms around my sides and retched, but only sour bile came up. I sat upright and rested my elbows in the crooks of my knees, holding my head in my hands. I felt awful and I wasn't sure I was going to make it to that town. How could he ask me to relax when I hurt so much?

"Take a deep breath, Noah."

I did, and it made me wince. "I'm hurt, Owen."

"Uh, yeah, I'm aware of that."

I smiled despite myself. "I mean, I'm really hurt. I don't think I can keep going this way."

He went silent for a minute. "Noah, look at me."

I sighed heavily but I raised my head and looked at him. "What?"

"Don't say that."

"Owen..."

"What?" He sounded irritated.

"Thank you," I breathed.

He nodded and stood up. He walked to the road's edge and just stood there. It looked like he was waiting for something. Whatever he was waiting for, it certainly took a long time for it to appear

because he stood there for quite a while. I watched him the entire time, wondering still what he waited for. When I heard the sound of a car, I knew. I knew what he was going to do. As the car drove nearer and saw him, it slowed down. It screeched to a complete stop when he stepped onto the road in its direct path. Owen tapped on the window and waited for the man inside the ugly beige truck to roll down the window. They exchanged a few quiet words, both glancing at me during this exchange. I noticed the young man nod and then he opened the door and came over to me with Owen. He crouched down.

If he noticed the dark stain on my shirt or the blood on my leg or the paleness of my bruised face, he didn't acknowledge any of it. He studied my eyes and then he nodded to himself with a sigh.

"Come on, kid. I'll give you and you're friend a ride," he said.

I blinked. "Really?"

"Sure. Come on."

He stood up and walked back to the car. Owen stayed behind and helped me to my feet. I had to lean against him to limp to the car. He pulled open the door and lifted me into the backseat. He climbed in beside me and told the driver to go ahead. I leaned back in my seat and stared out the windshield blankly. It was only a few minutes before Owen's town really did appear.

The young man stopped his car beside a building that I supposed was his home and got out of the truck. Owen got out too and came to my side of the car. He pulled open the door and helped me slide onto the concrete. He caught me before I fell and supported my weight as I limped to the young man.

He smiled at me, but I noticed a sadness in his eyes, maybe pity as well. "May I please borrow your phone, sir?" I asked.

He shrugged and pulled it out of his pocket. "Sure, kid."

He put it in my open palm, and I limped away to lean on the hood of the truck while Owen dialed my father's number and then handed me the phone. He went to talk to the young man while I waited for someone to answer. It rang one time before he answered. He sounded like he'd been crying.

"Hello? Who is this?" he said.

I took a deep breath. "Father, I need you to listen to me." I paused and heard an audible intake of breath. "I'm in a place called..." I stopped again and looked around for a sign or something. I found a billboard that welcomed me to Sundale, a pretty stupid name if you asked me. "I'm in Sundale. I need you to come here and pick me up."

And Owen is here too."

"I know the place. I'll send someone straight away. Noah, are you all right?"

I sighed. "I'm... I'm injured, Father. It's okay though. Owen is taking care of it. I'll be fine."

"Are you sure? You sound quiet on the phone."

Yes because I was talking quietly. It hurt to breathe, so I only breathed as much as I needed to, which meant not wasting my breath on raising my voice. "It's fine, I'm okay. You shouldn't worry."

"That makes me worry, Noah."

I smiled a little. "I'll be home in no time, Father. Bye."

"Noah, don't you—"

I hung up and leaned heavily against the hood of the truck. I think I dropped the man's phone on the concrete. My hand drifted to my side, and I took a difficult breath. I took several more, in and out. I focused on breathing as I slid to the concrete ground. The cloth around my leg was red, my shirt was stained, my whole body felt bruised or injured. I was exhausted and starving, and I just wanted to stay there on the concrete forever. I probably would have if Owen hadn't knelt beside me and pulled me into a sitting position, both my arms wrapped around my sides.

He spoke quietly to me, but I was quite sure the driver had gone inside ages ago. I don't know why he spoke quietly; I only know that he did. "I'm so sorry, Noah."

I looked at him. "What for?"

"For everything. I should never have left you. He wouldn't have hurt you if I hadn't left."

I lifted my arm and put my red hand on his shoulder. "None of this is your fault. It's mine. Everything that's happened is because of me. Everything happened because I argued with my father. You had nothing to do with anything, Owen. Don't blame yourself." I paused and took a breath, my hand sliding back to my side. "The only thing you're guilty of is helping me and saving my life."

Owen sighed. "Thank you, Noah. You... you've changed." He looked me over. "But you can't stay here like this. You need to go to a hospital. There's a small one..."

I nodded. "That's... good."

He helped me stand up and wrapped my arm around his shoulders. "I think we can walk there."

I shrugged and followed him away from the house. We walked down the streets, only seeing a few people out and about. I was

surprised there weren't more people during such a fine afternoon. It was cool and there was even a slight breeze. It felt nice against my hot skin. I wondered later if there were actually people living in all these houses. We passed at least eleven before I stopped counting.

Owen helped me limp across the streets. He never said anything more to me, though he did keep looking at me with a strange expression. Whenever I stumbled or my leg crumpled beneath me, he made sure I didn't fall. I supposed that was a good thing, but it did hurt me to keep walking like this. My leg hurt from the constant pressure; my back ached from being hunched over. My arm throbbed, but it didn't hurt. My hand was red from resting over my side, which hurt almost as much as my leg. It was bruised terribly from when Chase kicked me incessantly and bloody from when he stabbed me. Physical injuries aside, I was shaky and thirsty and tired. My very bones felt the exhaustion of the past few days. Honestly, I was surprised I was still standing.

Despite Owen's assurances that we would be at the hospital soon, we kept on walking and walking. It was dark when we stumbled to the edge of town where there were no houses or buildings and certainly no hospitals. Owen cursed under his breath and began to walk back toward town. I slipped my arm from his shoulders and stood unsteadily behind him.

"Owen, it isn't there," I said.

He turned around and released a breath. "It has to be. What kind of town doesn't have a hospital or recovery building or something?"

"A rundown one." I took a rattling breath and sighed deeply. "It's fine anyway. I'm fine. Father said he'd send someone to get me. They'll be here soon, Owen. They'll..." I dropped to my knees and caught myself with my hands. My arms shook just holding up my light frame. "They'll take us home," I breathed.

Owen supported my weight while he helped me into a sitting position. I closed my eyes to rest them and leaned back against a tree. I breathed deeply and then... I don't know. Then I felt a calmness wash over me. The pain dimmed and I felt alarmingly at peace.

Owen shook my shoulder, but I didn't open my eyes. "You can't last like this much longer, Noah. You haven't eaten anything for who knows how long. You're extremely dehydrated. You're injured. You need to see a doctor right away." He paused and gritted his teeth; I know because I could hear him doing it. "Noah, listen to me."

"I am listening," I whispered.

"Your father probably is sending someone here, but you still need to see someone. Please, Noah."

I shook my head. "He already sent someone, ages ago. After I hung up. They can't possibly be much farther away."

"Yes, they can. They could be hours, *days*, away. We can't afford to wait that long. Get up and we can find somewhere or someone that can help you right now."

He stood and took my elbow to help me stand as well, but I couldn't. I wouldn't be able to walk, and he would have to carry me. I didn't want to be carried and I didn't want to ride on his back. It was bumpy and tiresome. What I wanted to do was rest right here against this tree and wait for my father's man to come get me and take me home. I wanted a moment of stillness and quiet so I could sleep.

I pushed his hand away and looked up at him. "I'm not going anywhere, Owen. I'm staying right here and waiting for my father. Please, let me sleep. One hour is all I'm asking. Owen, please."

He folded his arms across his chest and shook his head. "All right, fine. An hour, Noah. That's it."

I relaxed. "Thank you."

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Over an hour had passed when I heard a helicopter. Normally, the noise wouldn't have woken me, but it was sudden and deafening and I was already waking up anyway. My bodily pains hadn't allowed me the rejuvenating rest I had hoped for. I kept waking up and having to change positions, shift my leg, sit up straighter, or lean to the side. I felt more exhausted than I had before my sleep, and that meant I was a little delirious.

I thought the helicopter was a car when I first heard it, that's how tired I was. It didn't occur to me that it was a helicopter until I had looked in every direction for a car and found none. Perhaps another, more obvious hint was Owen standing away from me and waving his arms. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and winced as I pushed myself to my knees. It took all my will not to collapse as I forced myself to stand up. I kept one hand against the tree for support, but it really didn't help much to take the weight off my leg.

The helicopter was small and gray with an American flag painted on its side. I hadn't realized Owen was so far away until the copter landed, and I barely felt its wind. By the time the propellers slowed to a stop and Owen walked toward me with someone from

the helicopter, I was leaning heavily against the tree trunk. It took everything left in me to prevent myself from sliding down the trunk and falling to the ground.

As they got closer to me, I recognized the second man. The brown hair, blue eyes, and his bright smile. It was Milo. My big brother had come here himself to bring me home. The dam holding back my memories felt so close to breaking, I could feel it crack just a little. I was so close to knowing everything, to answering all my questions, to knowing my own family again... So close, and still not close enough.

Milo was the first to reach me. He stopped short of running over me and his smile fell. His eyes fell first to the dark stain on my shirt, to my leg, and finally he met my eyes. He looked concerned and... angry. He was angry with me.

I took a deep breath and spoke quietly. "Milo, I'm so sorry. I didn't know this would happen. I didn't want them to hurt anyone else. You must understand why I stayed. I couldn't let them kill you. I'm sorry."

He was already shaking his head before I finished. He didn't sound angry when he spoke though. "I can't be angry with you for doing the right thing, but I can..." He sighed. "I can forgive you." Milo gave me a quick embrace. "It's good to see you, Noah."

I glanced at Owen and smiled tiredly at my brother. "Let's go home, Milo. You don't know how much I've missed Father."

He smiled. "All right."

Owen began to help me, but the second he pulled me away from the tree's support, I gasped and crumpled to the ground. I landed heavily on my injured side and finally, finally, finally made a small cry of pain. I rolled onto my back and winced when I placed my hand against the stab wound, but I kept it there because I felt the warmth of my own blood. I tried to breathe evenly, to take deep breaths, but it wouldn't work. I could only breathe short, quick breaths as I felt the blood drain from my face.

Owen dropped beside me and gently moved my hand from my side. He put his own hands on the injury. I understood in an instant what he was going to do. I pushed his hands away and scooted back from him.

"Noah, there isn't time for this," Owen said as he knelt beside me again.

I rested my head on the ground and pulled in enough air to speak. "Please don't. Just take me to the helicopter and I can go

home." I winced. "Owen, please."

Milo crouched beside me and took my elbow to sit me up. He placed a hand on my shoulder and one on my back and he looked at me with all the seriousness of a predator hunting prey. I looked back at him, but I think there was only sadness and maybe longing in my eyes. And pain.

"You've lost so much blood already. You need to let him do it before we go home." He blinked a few times. "Noah, *please*."

I took a deep breath and crawled back to the tree to slump against it. "Fine," I breathed, "fine."

Owen gestured to Milo for him to stay where he was as he knelt down one final time. He moved my hand away again and he untied the shirt beneath the one I was wearing. I winced when his cold hands touched my skin. He whispered an apology and then he applied pressure to stop the bleeding. I gasped and I tried not to pass out, I really did. It didn't work. I remember Owen glancing up at me, and then I collapsed against the trunk of the tree and the world was black.

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I woke to the sound of voices. A female voice speaking quietly to someone. Another voice I recognized but couldn't place. A voice that sounded younger than the rest. I opened my eyes and squinted at the bright lights above me. I noticed the food on the table beside me and as I shoved it in my mouth, I realized that nothing had ever tasted so good. I drank the large glass of water that was on the table as well. No one seemed to notice I was awake, so I closed my eyes and went back to sleep.

This time, when I woke up, every inch of me ached. The bed I was in was rough against my back, my side hurt because I'd been laying on it, and my leg felt heavy and painful. I noticed this time that I was wearing a hospital gown. I glanced at my arm and saw the bandages around it. I'd had surgery, I supposed. Stitches were probably the extent of it. I think the bullet went all the way through, so they wouldn't have needed to remove it. I laid my head back on the soft pillows and let sleep embrace me once more.

When my eyes opened for good, I turned to my back and winced, but it didn't hurt me as much as before. I drank the glass of water that someone had kindly placed on the table and sat up in the bed. I gasped when I twisted to look for my brother or Owen or even my father. I straightened and only turned my head to look around for

them. I saw Milo standing by a window and somberly staring through the glass.

I uncovered and slid out of the bed, a hand on the mattress for stability. I didn't think I would fall, but I wanted to be sure. I took a tentative step toward my brother and winced at the soreness that my leg felt, but it didn't give way beneath me. I had a heavy limp as I walked toward him, and I was thankful that was all. I limped to the window and stared through it with him, unsure what to say.

After a minute of quiet, he turned from the window and looked at me with his usual wide grin. "Are you in much pain?"

I shrugged. "There are aches everywhere, and my leg and side still hurt. Besides that, I'm only sore." I turned away from the glass as well and took a deep breath. "Milo, I don't... I can't..."

He seemed to understand what I was trying to say. "You'll remember. And if you don't, then we can make new memories. It's going to be okay, Noah."

I smiled a small smile. "Is Owen here?"

"He left a little while ago to tell Dad what's been happening. I think he's going to take us home when he gets back."

Home. I still didn't know what that meant to me. The White House? Being with my family? Maybe it didn't mean anything to me. I sighed and slumped in a nearby chair. "If he's taking us home, then how long have I been here?"

Milo avoided my eyes. "A week, or a little more."

I pushed a hand through my hair. "That's... longer than I expected. And Father, did he... Did he ever come to see me?"

"He didn't, no. He's been busy with work." Milo sat in a chair across from me. "Owen told the police where they could find that guy, Chase or whoever, and he's in prison. I thought you might like to know."

Sure, I was glad the man was behind bars, but that didn't matter to me then. What mattered to me then was remembering who I was and who my family was. I wanted so much to recall everything. The arguments I had with my father, my mother, my father, my brother, Owen. I wanted to know why I had left the house, where I had gone. I wanted to know how I had escaped from Chase and ended up in that town. I wanted my life back, and it just refused to come.

I put my head in my hands. "Thanks, Milo," I muttered.

"Maybe you should rest, Noah. You look exhausted. I'll wake you if Owen comes," Milo said.

"For once, sleep isn't what I need. What I need is my memory and my life. I need to remember everything, Milo. Why can't I? What happened to me?"

"I'm sure you just hit your head or something. It will all come back, you'll see. I promise."

"Please, Milo, don't make a promise you can't keep."

"Sorry."

I winced as I stood and had to keep a hold of the chair so I wouldn't topple over. When I was steady, I turned to my brother. "I need some air. I'll only be a few minutes."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"I'm fine. I'll be okay."

I limped out of the room and noticed several nurses, but none of them tried to stop me. I took it as a good sign and kept walking down random hallways until I found an empty one and slid down the wall with my head between my knees. I was happy to be alone, finally, but mostly I wanted the quiet.

I stayed that way for a long time, thinking about things and arguments and people. I wondered what would happen if I got my memories back. Would I go back to being the selfish brat I apparently was before? Would I remember everything and stay as I was then? Would I turn away from everything I knew and loved because of my father? That wasn't who I wanted to be. That was someone I knew nothing about and who was insanely wrong about everything. Even not remembering who my father was, I knew he loved me. I knew it by the way he sounded on the phone, by the worry in his voice. I knew it in my heart, and if I hadn't been able to see that before, well, then I was blind. If I hadn't seen it seen it before, I was an idiot and I was selfish. *That* was not who I wanted to be. I wanted to be exactly the way I was right then, at that moment. I wanted to be welcomed home with open arms.

I let my mind wander off for a time, and then I thought about my mother. I knew the least about her. Why hadn't she ever come up in my conversations with Owen and Milo? Her name was Ina, but that's all I knew. Had I argued with her too? Had I simply ignored her? Was she even alive? What if she didn't live with my father anymore because of me? What if I had... caused her to leave? What kind of son must I have been to cause that? What kind of son would argue and fight with his father until he caused his own mother to walk out the door? Had I been that son?

I shook my head and closed my eyes, and I wept. The hot tears

dripped onto the tile floor and chased each other down my face. I cried silently, but I heard the voice inside me. I heard it cry out to my father and mother with apologies. I heard it cry out to my brother with apologies and to everyone. To every name I knew, there was an apology after it. Even when that voice grew silent, I still felt the tears run down my cheeks. I calmed down after a short while because the deep breaths were hurting me. I did take a few more breaths to calm down though, and I wiped away my tears.

I took a shaky breath, and it lodged in my throat as I stood up. I leaned against the wall before I collapsed, but my leg sagged beneath me, and I fell to my hands and knees anyway. It was lucky none of the stitches, if they hadn't already been removed, had torn. I waited until I was relaxed and breathing evenly to stand. I kept a hand on the wall as I walked to make sure I wouldn't fall again.

I had absolutely no idea where I was going; the hospital was like a maze. There were turns everywhere and hallways that branched off in other directions. I hadn't asked anyone for help because I didn't know my room number or if Milo was still there. I was hopelessly lost in a hospital.

I'd been wandering the halls for hours when I at last saw someone who would be able to help me. He had black hair that wasn't nearly as messy as the last time I'd seen him. His blue eyes were stern and dark. He was wearing a black suit like he had been when he landed on me. I was glad he was here. I allowed myself to slide down the wall again as I waited for him to see me and come over. I didn't have long to wait.

Owen stood over me with folded arms and an expression I couldn't place. It might've been concern mixed with relief and anger, but there was always a hint of anger in his eyes. He shook his head at me.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

He raised a brow. "Sitting on the floor of a hospital hall."

"Yep." I winced. "I wanted to be alone. I didn't know there would be a hundred different hallways."

He extended his hand and pulled to my feet, but he did it carefully so as not to hurt me. "How do you feel?"

"I feel a week or two from being normal," I said.

"Good. Uh... Where's your brother?"

"He's still in my room, or he was when I left him a bit ago."

Owen sighed. "It was more like three hours ago, Noah."

I limped in silence beside him as we made it out of the halls, and I saw my room. Milo was still there, pacing back and forth from bed to door. I went over to him and gripped his shoulder to stop him.

"I apologize. I lost my sense of time, and then I got myself lost. I didn't mean to stay away for so long."

Milo muttered something under his breath. "I know, but you're the only human alive that would get lost in a hospital, Noah. There are signs everywhere and you could've asked someone."

"Yes, well... I didn't know the room number."

Milo sighed. "Of course you didn't."

I shrugged apologetically and turned back to Owen. "Since you're here, does that mean...?" He nodded. "Father is here?"

"No, but I'm going to take you to him. My car is parked right outside. If you're ready, we can get out of here."

"Don't we have to check out or something?"

He smiled. "I've handled everything, Noah. It's time to go home."

Home. What a beautiful word that is. I grinned. "All right."

I followed my brother and Owen out of the hospital and found myself worrying. What if my father didn't want to see me? What if I had gone too far last time and he was tired of dealing with me? Would he kick me out? I couldn't stop worrying as I climbed into the car's back seat. I grimaced when I tightened the seatbelt. It didn't really touch my side, but it was irritating when it rubbed against the injury. Something occurred to me just as Owen started the car.

"Is there something else I could change into before we go?" I asked.

"Oh, right." Milo reached under his seat and pulled out some clothes that I supposed were mine. "Here you go."

I took them back inside the hospital and found a bathroom to change in. I tore the gown off and pulled my other clothes on, pausing briefly when the waistband of my pants rested on the stab wound. I pulled the sweatshirt over my head and threw the gown into the trash. Before I left, I looked at myself in the mirror, hoping some sort of recognition would bring my memory back. It didn't. I saw a complete stranger in the glass with messy brown hair and blue eyes. The bruise on my jaw was a nasty green color and I looked tired and horribly pale. There I was, and I didn't even know who I was. I shook my head and went back to get in the car.

Owen pulled out of the parking lot, and I stared out the window and leaned back in my seat. Nothing I saw was familiar. Nothing I saw jumped out at me and jogged my memory. All I saw were trees

and bushes and cars and buildings. I shivered when we passed a warehouse, a sense of dread momentarily washing over me. Owen drove mostly straight, except for three left turns. He stopped the car fifteen minutes after he'd started it and I closed the door behind me as I got out.

Right there in front of me was the White House, massive and white. It was impressive, sure, but something in me felt like seeing it was nothing new, so I wasn't stunned into silence when I saw it. I limped ahead of the others, though I stopped short of the entrance. Standing right there was a man. He was tall and he wore a suit. Even from where I stood, I saw the American pin on his jacket. I saw his brown hair and his blue eyes, and I knew. I saw him and it all came back to me. The memories, the yelling, the running away. Chase and Dave had been waiting for me right outside those doors, or, more likely, waiting for my father. They'd beaten me unconscious. I recalled something else they'd done too, but the memory was blurred. The next thing I remembered was waking up in the town. Everything after that was clear. It was all there again, and I continued to stare at the man by the entrance.

Here was my father, waiting for me to come home even after every selfish thing I'd said to him. After all I had done, he was still waiting for me to come home. Every one of my fears dissolved the instant my memory returned. I wouldn't be how I was before. I loved my father and my brother and my mother. I loved my home, and it would be a long time before I left it again.

I limped to my father and, just as I had fantasized, he opened his arms to receive me. I flung my arms around him, and my tears spilled onto his shoulder. I had missed him so much during everything that had happened, I couldn't put it into words. I hadn't seen my parents for weeks and weeks, and now I was home, and everything was okay.

Owen and Milo stood a respectful distance back, but when my father released me, I noticed both their smiles. Something was different when I looked at Milo though. I recognized him as my brother, and I gave him a brief embrace as well. Then I turned back to Father and saw him wipe away a few of his own tears.

"I'm so sorry for everything I did and everything I said. I... I didn't know what I was saying. I was angry with you. But I'm not angry anymore. I missed you so much, Dad. I missed all of this and I'm so sorry..." my voice broke. I brushed away a tear. "I'm so sorry I ever, ever doubted you."

He embraced me again and when he pulled away this time, he kept his hands on my shoulders. "Thank you for saying that. I missed you too, Noah. I'm so happy to see you again."

Then my mother came outside. I knew her now as well. Like all of us, her hair was brown and her eyes blue. Her hair fell over her shoulders, and she looked dreadfully exhausted, but the smile she gave me when she saw me was the most perfect thing in the entire world. I limped into her arms, and she cried on my shoulder. I was finally home.

The End



Home

That was a word Noah didn't quite understand. Something he'd forgotten about. He knew what it meant, but he didn't know what it meant to *him*.

Home was the only thing he wanted. If he never remembered anything else, maybe he could remember home.

Maybe he could remember what it meant to him?